

# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMPLOYMENT PRESSURE, ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION AND SUICIDAL IDEATION OF CHINESE STUDENTS STUDYING IN CHINA AND THAILAND

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**Abstract:** This study was conducted to investigate whether there are differences in suicidal ideation between Chinese college students studying in Thailand and in China, and to investigate the relationship between employment pressure and romantic relationship satisfaction with suicidal ideation among Chinese college students studying in Thailand and in China. The sample consisted of 1090 respondents of whom 420 (38.5%) were males and 670 (61.5%) were females, 507 (46.6%) respondents reported that they were studying in universities in China, while 581 (53.4%) reported that they were studying in universities in Thailand.

**Keywords:** Suicidal Ideation, Chinese College Students, Employment Pressure, Romantic Relationship Satisfaction

## Introduction

Suicide is considered a consequence of social conditions, as humans are primarily social beings that live and act in a society (Retterstol, 1993). Youth suicide is a health concern around the world. Estimates are that, for every completed suicide, nearly 10-20 persons attempted suicide (WHO, 2006) but in youth groups, for every completed suicide, nearly 100-200 young people attempted suicide (Paladino & Barrio Minton, 2008). The ratio between complete suicide, attempted suicide, and suicidal ideation is 1:10:100 (WHO, 2006). That means for every youth completed suicide, nearly 100-200 youth attempt suicides, and 10000-20000 youth think about suicide. Suicidal thoughts and suicidal ideation is more common than suicide in youth group. Suicide is the leading cause of death in age group 15-34 in China (WHO, 2008). Suicidal ideation is one of the risk factors for suicidal behavior.

According to Lipschitz (2009), in China, college students are aged around 17-25 years old. During this stage, they are physically adults, but psychologically between adolescent and adult. They have to think about adult responsibilities. Many teenagers and young adults find this unbearable. These factors seem to contribute to the increased suicide rate.

College is a special community and wave of suicides can move quickly across campus (Paladino & Barrio, 2008). College students are experiencing transitions from adolescent to adult and campus to society. In the same vein, Everall, Bostik, and Paulson (2005) posited that lack of life experiences and poor problem solving skills might make young people feel hopeless and experience stress when they face a crisis. The authors asserted that these young persons might think that death is the only way to escape from a crisis they cannot cope with.

Chinese college students' annual suicide rate was 20 per 100,000 (Chinese Mental Health Association & BPCRIC, 2004). Zhai and associates (1997) indicated that the suicide rate of Chinese college students was higher than the same age group of non-students. In another study, the college students' suicide rate was 2-4 times higher than people of the same age who were not students, and female students had a higher rate than male students did at 2:1 (Tan, 2005). These might suggest that there are many Chinese college students at risk of have suicidal thoughts and suicidal behaviors, considering the large population of Chinese college students.

There are many risk factors that contribute to Chinese college students' suicide and suicidal ideation. For example, depression level is positively related to suicidal ideation (Wang & Lu, 2001). Type A personality relates to suicidal ideation and attempted suicide (Wang & Li, 2007). Previous suicide attempts, self-harm, anxiety (Yu, Wang, & Huang, 2005), poor self-esteem, negative life events (Zhang, 2005), relationships with parents and social circle (Zhong et al., 2003), poor family support, serious loss, lack of future plan, refusal to communicate with others, guilt, aggression (Jin, Wang, & Lu, 2003) are risk factors for Chinese college students. In addition, Zhang, Luo, and Han's study (1999) found that students with drinking behavior tend to have higher suicidal ideation than students who do not drink.

In terms of demographics, gender difference need to be considered in suicide intervention and prevention among Chinese young people. Chinese female students have a higher suicide rate than male students (Xia, 2005). Likewise, female students also have a higher rate of suicidal ideation than male students (Wang & Lu, 2001; Zhang, & Jin, 1998). Thus, in Chinese samples, there is consistent evidence that females generally have higher suicidal ideation and completed suicides than males (Zhang & Jin, 1998).

College students are experiencing a transition—adolescent to adult. In this stage, they are

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more easily hurt and the painful experiences may leave emotional scars (Manor, Vincent, & Tyano, 2004). They face a variety of stresses. Because of their lack of life experience, they are more likely to have negative thinking about life events; and poor problem solving abilities may contribute to feeling hopeless as well as making irrational decisions (Everall, Bostik, & Paulson, 2005).

Most of the studies in China focused on the list of risk factors of suicide behaviors; only a few, however, looked at how employment pressure and romantic relationship satisfaction affect suicidal ideation among Chinese college students. The current study projects that employment pressure and romantic relationship satisfaction may factor in suicidal ideation among Chinese college students, especially those studying in another country—Thailand. Unemployment is a serious problem in China now; it is believed that many college students cannot find a job after graduation. This is likely to cause financial problems that may lead to negative self-worth. It may also be the case that disappointment in love may lead to more stress among college students who are already faced with a multitude of stressors. During these stressful situations, it is not unlikely that college students may think negatively about their future and about life in general. Under these circumstances, Chinese overseas students may be prone to thinking negatively and may even think about suicide.

Overseas students may also face the problems of lacking points of reference, social norms, and rules to guide their action and understand others' behavior that, in turn, can cause social isolation, stress, and confusion (McNamara & Harris, 1997) especially for the college freshman. Qiu (2005) observed that the Chinese college students studying in Thailand experienced more stress than Thai college students and that Chinese female students suffered more stress than their male counterparts did.

In their study on overseas students in higher education, McNamara and Harris (1997) asserted that, "the experiences of studying in a foreign country leave a powerful impression on young people" (p. 14). The study revealed that overseas students face a variety of problems such as language problems, financial stress, loneliness, homesickness, academic problems, and problems of late-adolescents/young adults asserting their emotional and intellectual independence. It was also found that some of the students can cope with these problems but some of them cannot.

Selye (1974) said, "complete freedom from stress is death" (as cited in Phillip, 1998, p. 6). This might be the reason why some people think about suicide when under severe stress. Today, in China, there is great competition in the Chinese education

environment. From primary school to university, students compete with each other and only the best one can go to the best school. They go through a very competitive stage to get into universities, and then when they are almost burnt out by the competitiveness among students. Chinese college students are bound to suffer more employment pressure than ever before.

Normally, Chinese college students are aged between 17 and 25 years. According to Erikson's theory, in this stage, the predominant conflict was intimacy versus isolation. Young people seek companionship and love, which put them at risk for rejection (Portes, Sandhu, & Longwell-Grice, 2002). Rejection could lead to psychological pain. Once rejected, they may get hurt and turn to isolation. Many do not want to get hurt again. It may be that some of them considered the problem narrowly and, not being able to escape from the deep pain, suicide seems a good solution. In China, 22% of completed suicides were indirectly influenced by disappointment in love (China Youth Daily, 2006, March 3).

Breaking up/rejection often leads to depression and pain. During this period, the affected individual gets depressed, cries a lot, becomes irritable, and loses interest in many things. His/her learning becomes inefficient, he/she does not want to go outside, loses appetite, develops forgetfulness, insomnia, headaches, and becomes pessimistic (Lan, 2005). More females than males think about suicide, and more females commit suicide to escape from this kind of pain. Tan's (2005) research showed that females were too focused on love and have become over-dependent on others. One study found that 18.8% of Chinese female college students considered males as being more intelligent than females (Liang, 2002).

In Chinese society, people expect more from males than females; this sounds more like male stereotyping and "macho" role expectation (Mishara, 2009). While disappointment in love could not be easily accepted by most female college students, for male college students, disappointment in love is easier to accept. Ambivalent female college students are more deeply attached to their ideal and react with suicide towards the rejecting person. They hope their death would have an evil impact on the survivors (Leenaars, De Wilde, Wenckstern, & Kral, 2001).

Additionally, suicidal ideation is common among Chinese college students. College is a special environment. If a suicide occurs in a school, it has an impact on hundreds of people (WHO, 2000). It is indeed important to study college students' suicidal ideation/thoughts with a view to helping them escape the crisis. There is the assumption that employment stress may be more correlated with Chinese male college students' suicidal ideation, while romantic relationship satisfaction may be more correlated with

suicidal ideation among Chinese female college students.

As far as Chinese overseas students are concerned, there are a few studies related to suicidal ideation among this student group, especially those in Thailand. In this situation, Chinese overseas students are studying in a new country and everything for them is new. Death is a very sensitive word in Chinese culture. Many Chinese people avoid talking about it. Not all the individuals who report suicidal ideation will try to kill themselves. Nevertheless, it has to be said that suicidal ideation is a risk factor for suicide. If someone has suicidal thoughts, that means this person needs help. Chinese overseas students' suicidal ideation/thoughts need to be identified, as they are a disadvantaged group, in a way. In response to this need, the current study attempts to examine suicidal ideation with the implication that employment stress and romantic relationship satisfaction may be significant stressors that may influence suicidal ideation among Chinese college students studying in Thailand.

### Methods

This was a quasi-experimental and correlation study, which attempted to investigate the relationship between employment pressure, romantic relationship satisfaction, and suicidal ideation among Chinese college students studying in Thailand and China. This quantitative study was based on the responses of participants to a survey questionnaire.

The researcher had recruited two sample groups. One sample group consisted of Chinese college students studying in Thailand and the other sample group was comprised of Chinese college students studying in China. There were 1218 copies of the questionnaire had been given to the participants and 1099 copies were returned. In these returned questionnaires, there were 9 unfinished, 1090 valid respondents.

This study utilized a self-report questionnaire for collecting data. The instrument includes: Personal Information section; Relationship Assessment Scale-measure romantic relationship satisfaction; Chinese College Students' Job-Hunting Stress Questionnaire-measure employment pressure; and Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation-measure suicidal ideation. Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation measure two scores. The first part asks about suicidal ideation in "this week" (short-term) when the participants fill in the scale. Second part asks about suicidal ideation when they have been most depressed (long-term) in their life experience.

### Results

The sample consisted of 1090 respondents of whom 420 (38.5%) were males and 670 (61.5%) were

females, 507 (46.6%) respondents reported that they were studying in China, while 581 (53.4%) were studying in Thailand. Their ages ranged from 17 to 28 years, with a mean age of 21.49 years.

In the current study, 13.4% of participants reported a wish to die in the current week when they filled in the questionnaire and 26% reported wishing to die when they were most depressed. The results showed that students studying in Thailand reported higher suicidal ideation than the students studying in China. Chinese participants reported higher relationship satisfaction and lower employment pressure than the students in Thailand. Employment pressure was significantly associated with suicidal ideation among the students studying in China but not students in Thailand. Romantic relationship was not significantly related to suicidal ideation at any point between the two groups.

Chinese students studying in China reported significantly lower suicide ideation in the week they filled in the study's questionnaire than those studying in Thailand. The results showed that there was an overall significant effect of 'study location' for the three variables combined. Chinese students studying in China reported significantly lower employment pressure than those studying in Thailand. Chinese students studying in China reported higher relationship satisfaction than their counterparts studying in Thailand. Thus, Chinese students studying in Thailand in this sample, reported similar higher suicidal ideation-this week, higher employment pressure, and lower relationship satisfaction than Chinese students studying in China.

The multiple regression analysis results revealed that the structure of linkages between the models' predictor and dependent variables are different for the two groups of Chinese students. For those students studying in China, employment pressure appeared to be the most important predictor of their suicidal ideation, whether for 'this week' or for 'when they are most depressed'. Their reported level of employment pressure had significant association with their suicide ideation. Thus, the more employment pressure they reported experiencing, the higher their suicide ideation, both for this week, and for when they are most depressed. For those studying in Thailand, it appears that neither satisfaction with romantic relationships or employment pressure were significant in influencing their suicidal ideation, in this sample.

There was an overall significant gender effect for the three variables combined, but not for the suicide ideation-when most depressed variable. Males reported higher relationship satisfaction, lower employment pressure and higher suicidal ideation than females.

## Discussion

This is quite similar to overall estimates of the prevalence of suicidal ideation from previous research using the BSSI with Chinese college students. Thus, the current sample is similar in some ways to results of previous research.

Why did Chinese students studying in Thailand report higher suicidal ideation than students studying in China? Several factors may have influenced these results.

First, the data in China was collected in March and April, after Spring Festival. The students studying in China could go back home and enjoy spending time with their families, which might result in decreased stress. In addition, they can meet their good friends at this time. It is reasonable to imagine that they were relaxed at that time. However, many of the students studying in Thailand cannot go back home because of different class schedules. They mostly have classes during that holiday when other Chinese families sit together and enjoy a family reunion. The data in Thailand was collected from June to August, after the "Thailand's Red Shirts" social problems. These students may suffer more negative emotions during this period. A higher level of stress from the social unrest may have also increased suicidal ideation when the data were collected. Thus, it is possible that students in China will have reported lower suicidal ideation than the students studying in Thailand in this study sample because of timing.

Second, and perhaps more likely, is that Chinese overseas students face a variety of problems and lack of support. This means that students studying in Thailand may suffer more stress and problems than students studying in China. Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) indicated that 34.9% Chinese overseas students have difficulty in carrying on their favorite leisure activities. This is important because this can be an important part of coping with stress. It is apparently easier for students in China to participate in their favorite leisure activities that would help them to cope with stress. Qiu (2005) also found that the Chinese overseas students in Thailand experienced more stress than Thai students and their stress is negatively related to their quality of life. These suggested that students studying in Thailand already have high-level stress than students studying in China because students in Thailand face more stressful problems and have difficulty in carrying on their favorite leisure activities to reduce their stress level. These factors would explain why Chinese studying in Thailand reported higher suicidal ideation than students studying in China.

Third, in a small community, Chinese overseas students have few connections with others, such as romantic relationship. Maybe both partners

are studying in Thailand or their partner is in China or other countries. It is possible that their romantic satisfaction was effected by their coping skills with their problems. These might explain that why students studying in Thailand reported lower romantic relationship satisfaction than students in China. In addition, because of the smaller community, these students in Thailand might lack social support when they need help. It also might affect their employment pressure because in a smaller, foreign community they do not know how to find a job. Therefore, it is possible that students in Thailand reported more thinking about suicide because of higher stress, external lack of social support and internal lack of coping skills to get out of dilemma. Thus, students in Thailand reported higher suicidal ideation than students in China in this study sample.

All these factors might have affected on these students' suicidal ideation, relationship satisfaction and their employment pressure. Overall, it seems that Chinese students studying in Thailand were experiencing more stress from a number of sources. This is consistent with previous research. The current study strongly suggests that these factors appear to impact suicidal ideation, even without the influence of gender.

The results also showed that gender was significantly associated with suicidal ideation-this week, employment pressure and relationship satisfaction. Females in this study reported higher employment pressure, lower relationship satisfaction, with lower suicidal ideation than male participants. Many corporate recruiters indicated "no females" in their job advertisement (Workers Daily, 2007, April 28). In addition, 18.8% of female students considered males as being more intelligent than females (Liang, 2002). This might explain why female students reported higher employment pressure than males. It is possible that females reported lower relationship satisfaction because female students were too focused on love relationship and were over-dependent on their partners (Tan, 2005).

In this study Females reported lower suicidal ideation (the week they filled in the questionnaire) than male participants. Other studies indicated that females reported higher suicidal ideation than males in their study sample among Chinese college students (e.g., Li, Liu, & Fang, 2007; Zhong, 2003; Jin, Wang, & Lu, 2003). However, Gao, Qu and Miao (2003) found female students reported lower suicidal ideation than males. Their study focused on the correlates (such as failing exams, smoking, drinking, disappointing in love, family income, and mental health) for suicidal ideation among Chinese college students in Shanxi Province. Moreover, the results showed that males reported more negative life events

and more mental problems. Thus, at least one other study found a similar pattern.

Wang and Lu (2001) indicated that female students were more open to seeking help than male students. It is important to consider the impact of male stereotyping and “macho” gender role expectation. Mishara (2009) has suggested these may increase stress for males as opposed to females in Chinese society. Confucius (*The Analects of Confucius*) said that “A man should be independent at the age of 30 (三十而立)”. This is construed to mean that male needs to get marry and settle down to a job around 30 years old. More than 2000 years Chinese people believe in these words. However, it is not easy to get marry in China now; a study on the normal cost of marriage in Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou discovered that the average cost is around 1,000,000 RMB (150,300USD) (Shanxi News, 2009). This is a very large amount for most people. Furthermore, in Chinese culture males need to pay the entire “marriage fee”. This might cause serious financial pressure among these males. All of these might explain why males reported lower employment pressure but reported higher suicidal ideation than females in this study.

In this study, relationship between stressor and suicidal ideation were different for student studying in Thailand and students studying in China. For Chinese students studying in China, employment pressure predicted suicidal ideation. That means the more employment pressure they suffer the higher suicidal ideation-this week and suicidal ideation-when most depressed.

Employment problems are a big concern in present China. Both Chinese group and Thai group of this study suffer employment pressure, with the students studying in Thailand reporting higher pressure in this area. Many studies have indicated that employment pressure significantly related to suicidal behaviors among Chinese college students (e.g., Liu, 2008; Tian, 2006; Tan, 2005). Because rapid social change in China, there is great competition for employment (Shirk, 2007). Employment pressure has become the primary stressor among Chinese college students (Lin, 2008).

For Chinese college students the employment situation was even worse; the students unemployment rate was 12.5% in 2007 and it increased in 14% in 2008 (Chengdu Business Daily, June 5, 2009). The number of college graduates increases every year. In 2001, there were 1.14 million graduates and employment rate was 70%; in 2005, 3.38 million graduates and employment rate was 72%; in 2007, there were 4.95 million graduates and employment rate was 65% (Zhong, 2009); in 2008, there were 5.59 million graduates and employment rate was less than

70% (Du, 2008), and in 2009 there were 6.11 million graduates. The large number of graduating Chinese college students, and high unemployment, might explain why there is a significant predictive relationship between employment pressure and suicidal ideation for students studying in China. That is, for students in China concerns about finding a job are directly linked to their level of suicidal ideation.

For Chinese students studying in Thailand, in this sample, there was no significant association between employment pressure or relationship satisfaction and suicidal ideation. It is important to emphasize that students studying in Thailand, reported higher employment pressure, lower romantic relationship satisfaction and higher suicidal ideation-this week. The results of this study suggested that both two groups of the participants suffer employment stress and when the students studying abroad this stress increased. Thus, study location had a significant effect for suicidal ideation-this week, employment pressure, and romantic relationship satisfaction. It thus appears that study location was the primary stressor in this group.

College students are making a transition from adolescence to young adult. They are experiencing role confusion and the specific ways in fit into society. They try to find their position and think about adult responsibilities. Nevertheless, because of Chinese parents’ over protections, most of the students lack experience about how to solve problems/frustrations. Indeed, most of Chinese students report anxiety, nervousness, and hostility (Zhong, et al, 2003; Yu, Wang, & Huang, 2005), impulsivity (Lan, 2005), difficulty adapting to a new environment, fragility, sensitivity, and unrealistic expectation (Li, 2007). Jin (2003) and her colleagues found that most of the male participants in that study considered suicide as a solution of dilemma and the actions could get attentions from others.

It is possible that these problems will get worse, when Chinese students are studying abroad, compared to studying in China. Many studies showed evidences that studying abroad, students have problems of: financial stress, loneliness, homesickness, academic problems, socio-cultural adjustment, making friends with local people, carrying on their favorite leisure activities, understanding a joke in English, health problems, and so on (e.g., Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Yuh, & Hiromi, 1996; Mcnamara, & Harris, 1997). It seems likely that studying abroad increases stress and negative emotions. The current study suggests that studying abroad made participants in Thailand more stressed than participants in China. Perhaps, because they were already highly stressed (that is, their level of employment pressure, relationship dissatisfaction and suicidal ideation is

already high within the whole group), no correlation was detected between stressors and suicidal ideation.

It is also possible that, despite higher employment pressure in the students studying in Thailand, it did not influence suicidal ideation because employment pressure is not an immediate problem. The participants in China can ask for, receive support, and help from their teachers and the college students committees; this is common in Chinese colleges and universities. However, students studying in Thailand are cut off from these sources of support and help. Thus, there may be many immediate problems such as how to live independently, for example, go to see a doctor alone when they are sick and take care of themselves; arrange daily life without parents' help; dealing with their psychological problems with limited social, peer and family supports, and so on. Because of their poor skills of solving problems, students studying in Thailand might get more problems that are psychological.

Zhang (2005) indicated that the college students who have suicidal ideation were presented prominent long-term psychological problems. This suggests that when students are reporting higher suicidal ideation, as the students studying in Thailand did, they are likely to have already developed more and more serious psychological problems as well. Thus, since they are more stressed and have more psychological problems, the direct correlation between pressure and suicidal ideation was not observed, even though the students in Thailand reported higher employment pressure and lower romantic relationship satisfaction than participants in China.

In addition, as noted above, the data in Thailand was collected from June to August of this year. The response of students studying in Thailand might be affected by the social problems and unrest of "Thailand's Red Shirt". This might have made them feel be unsafe and stressed, and could have been more important than employment pressure or relationship satisfaction at the time when data were collected.

### Recommendations

In conclusion, suicidal ideation, risk factors and stressors among Chinese overseas students should be concerned into further research. Moreover, there should be a careful suicidal ideation assessment for this group. Chinese students need more professional supports from their host colleges and from well-educated mental health workers and counselors. The overseas students also need to learn how to help themselves.

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